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SUBJECT: TUNISIAN INTELLECTUALS DISCUSS HUMAN RIGHTS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) To mark International Human Rights Day on December 10, the Ambassador discussed global and local human rights issues with a group of independent Tunisian intellectuals on December 6. Though the discussion began with local concerns about the rights of Guantanamo detainees and the situation in Iraq, later turning to a broader discussion of Tunisia, including freedom of association, freedom of expression, and the problems facing the Tunisian Human Rights League or LTDH, the oldest human rights league in the Arab World. The conversation was at its most animated when talking about the LTDH, reflecting the level of concern the LTDH crisis has generated within the intellectual and activist community. End Summary.

About the Middle East...

¶2. (C) To commemorate International Human Rights Day on December 10, the Ambassador invited a group of Tunisian independent intellectuals to a discussion of the global and local human rights issues on December 6. The invitees included Taieb Baccouche (director of the Tunis-based Arab Institute for Human Rights), Moncef Ben M'Rad (founder of Realites magazine and director of Arabic weekly Akhbar Al Joumhouria), Mahmoud Ben Romdhane (a former member of Amnesty International's Executive Committee), Mohamed Charfi (a professor of political science and former Minister of Education), and Taoufik Bouderbala (a lawyer and former president of the Tunisian Human Rights League). The conversation began, as many conversations in Tunisia with USG representatives do, with Guantanamo and Iraq. While concerned with the treatment of Guantanamo detainees for the detainees own sake, the group also made the argument that the United States has long been held as a model for human rights and democracy. USG actions in Guantanamo and Iraq, they said, have undermined the USG's moral authority to promote democratic reform, leaving human rights activists disillusioned and abandoned. That said, they added that the State Department's annual Human Rights Report is still credible and useful, though its impact is lessened now that people feel the US has lost the moral high ground. Moncef Ben M'Rad opined that Guantanamo and Iraq are the primary reasons for the dozens of negative articles about the United States appearing weekly in the Tunisian press. Charfi explained that the Middle East views Iraq through the lens of a colonial past. Though supportive of diplomatic means that

promote human rights, the presence of troops triggered a visceral, negative reaction in countries that were almost all former colonies of European powers.

13. (C) The Ambassador strongly refuted the group's characterization about Guantanamo detainee conditions, pointing out that the USG is actively exploring ways to close Guantanamo, and that many reports of detainee treatment have been exaggerated. The Ambassador pointed out that the detainees have access to religious materials, legal representation, and medical treatment. He added that the International Red Cross has access to the detainees. As for Iraq, the Ambassador explained to Charfi that the Iraqi government continues to ask US troops to stay in Iraq. The Ambassador pointed out that the USG liberated Iraq from the Saddam regime, and the group concurred that Saddam was responsible for the disappearance of thousands of Iraqis. The Ambassador opined that while the press devotes a good deal of energy to dissecting the American presence in Iraq, it spends little time criticizing the violent attacks of al-Qaeda and sectarian militia.

Back in Tunisia...

14. (C) Turning to Tunisia, Bouderbala stressed that he was disappointed by the level of European engagement in Tunisia. He specifically referenced the situation with the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH). Despite various attempts at mediation, a drawn-out legal battle has virtually paralyzed all activities of the Arab world's oldest human rights league (Ref A). Bouderbala lamented the fact that European powers have not done more to encourage a resolution. Baccouche opined that the LTDH situation is indicative of the larger situation in Tunisia with regard to freedom of expression. He explained that there is a general GOT intolerance of dissenting viewpoints in Tunisia, and that there is no open debate about issues such as censorship. For example, he said, the Arab Institute for Human Rights has several books that have been distributed elsewhere in the Middle East, but are banned in Tunisia. The GOT has never responded to the Institute's attempts to discuss the situation, nor has the GOT ever explained the reasons behind the decision. Bouderbala concurred and said that the GOT's problem with the LTDH is that it could not accept an independent organization that wouldn't respond to chastising phone calls telling it how to behave. He opined that when the GOT accepted the existence of an independent LTDH, the "crisis" would resolve itself. The group disagreed a bit on the question of whether not any political progress has been made during the twenty years of President Ben Ali's rule, or simply very limited progress. But all generally agreed that freedom of expression is restricted.

15. (C) Turning from the GOT's role in the LTDH situation, Ben M'Rad added that part of the LTDH's problem stems from the fact that the organization grew too political over the years. The LTDH, he said, was founded to be a non-partisan organization for the promotion of human rights, not an opposition party. He opined that the presence of opposition party representatives in the LTDH opened the organization to political critique and diminished objectivity. Bouderbala countered with his opinion that while he agreed that opposition party members should not import their party's objectives into the LTDH, the LTDH can and should welcome opposition party representatives so as to export the LTDH's objectives of human rights promotion into political parties. Baccouche, who recently returned from a meeting of international human rights organizations in Cairo, mentioned that he had spoken to Moncer Rouissi, President of the governmental Higher Council for Human Rights and Basic Liberties, about the LTDH. According to Baccouche, Rouissi is open to brokering a resolution between the various (pro-GOT and independent) LTDH factions, but felt that a compromise could not include the return of current LTDH president Mokhtar Trifi. Bouderbala said that during separate conversations with both Rouissi and Trifi, he

received the impression that each was waiting for the other to reach out. He concluded that the LTDH should stop attempting to negotiate the GOT, and simply organize itself and move forward.

Comment

¶6. (C) Sentiments about the LTDH clearly run deep among intellectuals and civil society activists. Part of this can be accounted for by the fact that for over twenty years, the LTDH was a haven for human rights defenders -- Activists who now find themselves without a home. Due to direct or indirect measures taken by the GOT, most organizations that may have served an organizing role, be it for human rights activists, opposition party members, or independent journalists, have found their ability to operate openly and legally restricted or eliminated (e.g. the Tunisian Journalists Syndicate, the Tunisian Green Party, etc.). Because forums in which issues such as the LTDH can be freely discussed are limited, the Embassy will continue to host intellectuals and civil society activists in a variety of venues to promote greater debate and exchange about human rights issues. End Comment.
GODEC